

Palm Sunday 2019

Beyond the Palm Trees is the title of the short history of this congregation by William Rose - Cathie and Libby's father. It is a title that plays on the fact that in front of the church there are two prominent palm trees – now enormous palm trees. These draw your eye – but beyond them is the church: a church as it happens with a rich history, a history of faithfulness and service. Beyond the palm trees there is much to see and understand.

Today is Palm Sunday, the week before Easter each year. It is a day remembered for much waving of palms; and the great hunt by latter day Christians for palms so they can be liturgically correct. It is also the day, as it will be again this year, as a day of protest and peace activism by Christians and others. Unlike earlier years when the issue was nuclear disarmament, it has morphed into a day about refugee policy.

Like our history book – I am wondering that today we might go beyond the palms, and all that Palm Sunday has become – and see what was going on, and why this day is so significant in the life of Christ, and then for us.

The original Palm Sunday rally in Jerusalem took place at a very tense time. Jesus and his followers were coming into Jerusalem from Bethany for the celebration of the Passover. This was the holiest and most significant of the Jewish festivals. It still is. For us as Christians, the last supper Jesus shared with the disciples was probably a Passover meal itself. This meal has ever since been associated with our sacrament of Holy Communion or the Lord's Supper. The bread and the wine, and the format itself – as we will recall at our Maundy Thursday celebration this coming week up at Kew – are Passover related. At bottom this was a festival about an oppressed people gaining their freedom; about a rabble of slaves and others being given by God a new life and the chance of freedom to form and establish a new nation. Freedom, national identity let alone the religious significance of God acting in history – is what the Passover was and still is about.

If you were the imperial power, like Rome – would you be happy for your subject people celebrating such a festival? I wouldn't think so. Well, as it happens, the Romans weren't either. As Jesus and his band of pilgrims approached Jerusalem in one direction (from the south), scholars have surmised that from the other side of town, Roman soldiers in huge numbers were probably approaching from the provinces (in the north). Military reinforcements were always sent to Jerusalem for the Passover festival. This was inherently a tense time for the Empire. The Passover had a significant political edge.

Now our gospel writer Luke adds to that tension.

And here we need to remember Luke is the most political of all the gospels. Only in Luke is there Mary's song – the Magnificat, a gentle manifesto of justice and equality; only in Luke is there the first sermon in Nazareth about freedom for the oppressed and the like. In Luke it is blessed are the poor; and not as in Matthew the poor in spirit. There is now this account of the entry into Jerusalem. Luke has the multitude of followers of Jesus not saying, or singing loud Hosannas, as in the other gospel accounts of this event record. The followers of Jesus are saying

“Blessed is **the king** who comes in the name of the Lord!”

Here is not – Blessed is he, or the one, who comes in the name of the Lord, as we say in our Communion service. Rather, “Blessed is the king – who comes in the name of the Lord.”

This ups the ante quite considerably in an already charged situation. This **was** inflammatory. An oppressed people – like they were back in Egypt – are now saying one of their number was a king! True he was on a donkey, but Rome would have smelt rebellion and revolution.

However, in this context the response is not from the Roman officials or some military spy. As Luke says,

“Some of the Pharisees in the crowd, said to him, ‘Teacher, order your disciples to stop.’”

It was the religious leaders who spoke out. “Shh, shh – quieten them down. Don’t you realise the whole city is on a knife edge. We don’t want a scene. You will jeopardise our Passover celebrations. Just cool it.” Let alone any animosity they might have had against Jesus personally.

I recently read about a new congresswoman in the US, called Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. She is quite the star for the Democrats at the moment – though is not putting her hand up to be a presidential candidate. Anyhow, when she was in college she read Martin Luther King Jr’s: *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*. She was struck by King’s criticism of white moderates who were urging him to slow down his activism. King writes:

‘I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro’s great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Supremacist or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice.’

Ocasio – Cortez agrees. And we see this is really what the Pharisees were on about. Don’t rock the boat. We know best. We don’t want you to damage the place and position of the Jews with the Romans. It is not just; but it provides order, a framework to exist. Again, what did the Pharisees say to Jesus? ‘Order your disciples not to be so provocative with all of this shouting and carrying on; triumphal processions don’t go down well. Particularly stop saying “blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord.” Don’t rile the Romans.

However, Jesus would have nothing of it. He makes a telling rebuttal.

“If these were silent, if his disciples were silent, if his followers were silent, s to who he really was, **the very stones would shout out!**”

Injustice, abuse, oppression – and here the truth about who I am and my ministry – will come out. It is so obvious, so significant and important, **the very stones will shout out**. We see people trampled by large institutions when they endeavour to reveal the truth; it is tough being a whistle blower; or as we found out with Geoffrey Rush’s defamation case for a young woman to call out inappropriate behaviour. But at the end of the day, there is something about truth and justice – it is almost inevitable; the very stones will should out. In the rash of Royal Commissions in recent times we have seen that truth eventually prevail: the Institutional Response to Child Sex Abuse, and then the Banking Royal Commission. And currently the treatment of our elderly and disabled. There is something deep and indomitable about the truth, about hope, about love; about justice; and here it related to Jesus’ identity. The very stones will shout it out.

However, here the whole story of Palm Sunday takes a surprising twist. Jesus presents a new understanding of kingship. He is not a king to rival Caesar, or even Governor Pilate. He is, to coin a phrase: the “prince of peace”. He is the king who rides on a donkey; sort of like having the Queen riding on a bicycle in some important procession. Here at the end of this ministry, his followers provide a bookend to what the angels said at his birth. When he was born, the angels said:

“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!”

As he came into Jerusalem, again only in Luke:

“Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven!”

In other words, he brings peace in the face of the might of the Roman Empire, peace everywhere. Heralded at his birth; confirmed at his death: Christ brings peace. Jesus, as it will unfold in this last week of his life – unpacks a different sort of kingdom to which the Pharisees and many others thought he was promoting. For Jesus, his reign is not based on military power, it is based on peace. A vision of a world in which God’s children live in a harmony and experience the fullness of life.

Luke continues immediately after his Palm Sunday account, with two further incidents that help us understand more what Christ’ peace involves. The first is that Jesus despairs. Jesus actually weeps over Jerusalem – he laments they do not understand his message of peace and understand his mission. It would seem that the only dimension that the residents of Jerusalem understood was political and military power. His speech at this point – no doubt embellished with the hindsight of the Gospel writer after the subsequent fall of Jerusalem in around the year 70, notes that the residents of Jerusalem will be crushed to the ground, and their enemy, read the Roman Empire, will not leave one stone upon another. They did not rightly perceive that nature of Jesus’ kingdom and his peace. They did not, according to Jesus “recognise the time of their visitation from God.” They just do not get the way to a full life. And by the sword they will fall.

The second thing Jesus does, again it would seem immediately on entering Jerusalem – in Luke’s very shortened version compared to the other gospels – Jesus cleanses the temple. The other gospels seem to have this event at a different time. He strips the temple of money changes. So even though the very stones might cry out: he still weeps over the people for not understanding his mission and he attacks the failure of organised religion, even the temple itself for its failure to understand his message. Somewhere here between these two incidents we are included. We cannot always assume we understand his truth.

As we know from the coming week, the prince of peace is not accepted, he is mocked as being a king, he has a crown of thorns, and for this he will be killed.

Palm Sunday is set in context of a struggle for political and religious power. Jesus comes with a message for both Empire and for religious authorities. By weeks end few comprehended, and we are left wondering if even those palm wavers also comprehended. In anticipation of this lack of understanding Jesus weeps – and willingly goes to his death.

There indeed is much to ponder beyond the palm trees; perhaps even the very essence of our faith and what we believe.